

Restart

Desperate for football game fuel, I met with the school stoner behind a grocery store. A filled, brown paper bag sat beside the curb he performed scooter tricks on. I pulled up beside him, rolling down the window, feeling a thousand eyes suddenly dart at me. I surveyed for cameras as Kevin traded his scooter for the bag.

“Yo,” he said handing it over.

“What’s up.” I returned a twenty.

“Stay safe,” he said, but I, already a good ten yards down the road, didn’t hear.

Returning home, I parked a couple houses away and popped the trunk to old McDonald’s bags, cigarillo wrappers, frisbees, golf clubs, torn sneakers, blankets and a tire tool kit. I stuffed the paper bag in the kit, which I hid under the blankets, closed the trunk and ran inside.

As I swung open the door, Dad came down the stairs. “Hey. Where’d you go?”

“I had to get gas.”

He laughed and shook his head.

The game theme was “Hawaiiin.” I spent twenty minutes rushing back and forth between my brother’s and father’s rooms, scouring hangers for the perfect floral shirt. I had to take the airhorn in my brother’s closet. Everybody would love it.

The game was ten minutes south with Colin’s place on the way. I had one good friend, Andrew, with a Protestant church leader for a mother. I spent most of my time at home, but I didn’t want to stay in for the night or show up to the tailgate alone. I didn’t want to piss Colin off by being late either, but as I headed for the door Mom made her usual last-minute delay.

“Hey, wait. What’s this eighty-nine I see in the system?” she said squinting her eyes at my grades on her computer.

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do.”

“I got an eighty-nine.”

“Tim.”

I tried again for the door.

“Hey! Come here.”

“What.”

“Why are you getting eighty-nines?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t study.”

“Yes I did.”

“No.”

I tried again.

“Hey! Back here! You need your pills.”

“I have to go.”

“Come here.”

She stood up and began taking pills out of bottles out of the cabinet. I filled a glass with water.

“You have gas in your car?”

“Yup.”

“No you don’t.”

I laughed. “I swear.”

“You know where you’re going?”

“Yup.”

“Where?” She handed over the near palm-size pile of pills.

“Allen.” I threw them all in my mouth, raised the glass and swallowed in one big gulp.

“Where in Allen?”

“What do you mean? The stadium.”

“Do you have an address?”

“Yes.” I tried again for the door.

“Have fun. Be careful.”

I slammed the door shut and ran for the car.

Long ago my brother had somehow broken the air conditioning. Even with the air rushing through the windows, the oven wouldn’t cool. My hands greased the steering wheel. At one of Colin’s neighborhood stop signs, I began brainstorming conversation topics as I pulled the bottled purple liquid out of its bag and took a shot. Grape flavored vodka. Some brand the world and I had never heard of. I had told Kevin to get the cheapest stuff possible. I didn’t know much about booze and had only had my first drink about a month ago. I didn’t care about the kind or the taste, as long as it did its job.

I pulled into Colin’s driveway, hoping he would text me he was running late or had found another ride or anything else that would push this inevitable tension far out of sight into the future. He popped out the front door and made his way to the passenger side.

“What’s good,” I said through the open window.

“How ya doin’,” he said.

He pulled on the door and hopped in.

“Damn, it’s hot in here.”

“Yeah, the AC doesn’t work.”

“Oh.”

Pulling out, I looked behind to check for coming cars. When I saw the road was clear, I continued to glance left and right and at all my mirrors, acting as if I were busy. But then we were driving, both of us looking around at the neighborhood with nothing but the engine’s soft buzz.

“You think it’s gonna be cold tonight?” I asked.

“Uh, I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

I nodded. What a stupid thing to ask. We came to a stop sign and watched a pair of cars crisscross.

“What’s Evan up to?”

“Uh, he’s chillin’ with some sophomore. Ariana I think.”

I didn’t know who Ariana was, but I nodded. As we drove out of the neighborhood, I waited for Colin to say something, but only the rubber and road spoke. We came to a red light.

“You hear Garnett’s retiring?” I said.

“Yeah, that’s crazy.”

“How old was he?”

“Uh, forty... I think.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

Why wasn’t he saying anything? Was he afraid? Was he in the same situation I was? Did he not care?

We came to the end of a long red light line. I had used all my safety topics. I tried to think of something, anything, but it seemed the more I tried, the more the void expanded. I was stuck in the mud of one of those nasty conversation stalemates where your thoughts are too tight to think of anything fresh or authentic, too egocentric to take a genuine interest in the other person and too splitting to slow down. A heavy sweat seeped from my back into the seat. I whipped the vodka out.

“Here,” I said.

“Beautiful.”

Colin raised the bottle and chugged two shots back to back. His face twisted and scrunched. I joined taking another.

“What is that?” he said coughing.

“I don’t know. Kevin got me some random shit.”

Together, we looked at the label:

W

A

V

E

Grape Flavored Vodka

“The fuck is this?”

We both laughed. The mud seemed to grow thinner. As the light went green, we turned left. The cop cruiser a couple cars behind continued straight.

It wasn't much, but as we drove down the road to the away team's stadium, I began to feel the effects settling in. Numbness, optimism, energy and a slight dizziness in the form of a big, stupid grin. As we passed the field of rowdy tailgaters, I reached back and grabbed the airhorn from the backseat, letting it rip out the window. Everybody roared.

We parked on the edge of an illegal parking zone, passed the bottle back and forth until we felt satisfied and leapt out, jogging over to join the fun. None of our friends had arrived yet. Most of those around us were seniors. I was surprised I didn't care. With the power of grape ethanol washing away any doubt of my ability to entertain, I not only talked with seniors, but made them laugh.

Over came Olivia, one of the head honchos of the tailgate committee, dressed in a bikini and hula skirt. She threw leis around my neck and painted my cheeks with black school-spirited streaks as I told her light-hearted, stupid things that weren't boring in the cool autumn air filled with warm, penetrating September rays.

By the time more juniors arrived, it was time to go in. They saw Colin and I all decorated and friendly with the older kids. I felt a sense of authority, not that I was better than them, but that I had an unquestionable permission to be myself around them. In an angry, chaotic line we filed into the stands.

I lost Colin in the mosh, but found myself standing next to Kira, a decent friend since the sixth grade. I never knew what to say to girls, not that I didn't like them, but I always knew what to say to Kira, yet I was never interested in her. Nothing terrible ever happened to her. Everybody loved her. A pair of slim dancer legs held up all that optimism and energy. She was the sun. We were both trashed and spent more time talking than watching.

In the aftermath of a touchdown celebration, she found a coconut bra on the floor and strapped it on me. Over and over, she would look at it and cup her mouth with her hands. Eventually, I had had enough and asked her not to stare.

After the second half began, she became concerned about a cut on her inner lip that her boyfriend, a popular senior, had given her by accident. She curled it inside-out right in my face. A little part of me thought of grabbing and kissing her right there in front of everybody. I told her she was fine.

We lost the game. Kira told me her and some friends were grabbing food, so I told Colin we were grabbing food. I still felt great and thought maybe I shouldn't drive, but getting a ride home and leaving the car behind would be the only evidence Mom would need to know her son was drinking.

I pulled onto the highway with Colin's head out one of the open windows. He played music off his phone and slurred the lyrics into sixty-mile-an-hour winds. I would've sung along if I wasn't busy fixing the wheel in place. I took full responsibility for keeping the vehicle between the lines, but not for driving sober. My car had turned into a boat long ago, rocking on the gentle chop of an impending storm.

We pulled into an Applebee's twenty minutes later. I needed a bed, but I thought the exhaustion would leave me dull. When Colin got out, I snuck another shot and joined him. By the door was a bearded man sucking cancer's cock. By his faded Yuengling tee, cargo shorts and sandals, I could tell he came from the bar, perhaps an Applebee's regular. I smelled the big mistake he was trying to forget. I used to hold my breath around people like that.

We went inside and joined everyone at the long table the waitresses had put together. I sat at the end across from Kira. I hated eating out. With a year of waiting up my sleeve, these Applebee's frauds couldn't sell me shit. The sides came from microwaved bags. The servers touched the food after scrubbing tables with dirty rags. I could never see what the cooks did in the kitchen hidden behind that thin food window, but I do know that the grills produced an incredible sauna effect, the perfect detox. I never liked being trapped face-to-face with somebody, forced to maintain proper eye contact and listen. I hated eating out, but not tonight.

I spent most of the meal asking Kira how I should reply to Natalie's texts. Natalie was a hot senior I'd been talking with for a week or two. How it was still happening I didn't know. We had met through an "Honest DM," a social media post on Twitter designed to bring lonely teens together. With these opportunities, I'd try to make girls laugh or say something smooth. It never worked. I finally gave up and asked Natalie straightforward questions about her life, making light of the things I found weird. She kept replying. Kira read through the messages.

"This is great," she said. I didn't believe her.

Natalie and I would keep replying for nine months. A couple weeks after Applebee's I took her out to smoke by the river while everyone else went to homecoming. She was quiet. I didn't know how to roll a blunt. I'd ask her something, she'd say something and then there was horrible silence eased by the flowing water. I wondered if she'd rather be at homecoming. I bet she did the same. We went to my place after and made out.

The group said their goodbyes. Colin found another ride. Jack asked for a lift. He was another one of those people I saw in school and even enjoyed talking to, but never hung out with. Of course I said yes. Driving someone desperate for a ride home seemed like a no brainer, an act of goodwill.

Passing the road to my neighborhood, we hit a jam. I poked my head out the window to a string of brake lights stretching far down Farmersville Road and over a hill. There was a big intersection way up ahead, but never before was it so backed up to produce a snailing line like this. I imagined the catastrophe: some idiot unaware of the coming car, turning right on red without stopping. Maybe from the Applebee's, I heard the SUV t-bone the poor fella off his wheels. Maybe I just didn't notice.

I didn't mind the traffic. I hoped it traveled all the way to Jack's place. I wouldn't have to worry about the wheel or the lines. I could relax, maybe even recline the seat. I could text Natalie, continuing to find my style and work my way up to that big question. Smooth sailing.

My headlights caught the shiny orange diamond on the side of the road that read: SOBRIETY CHECKPOINT AHEAD.

A strange thing happens in the mind when you know you're fucked. Willful disbelief, ignorance, blindness. I read the sign. I knew what was at the end of the line, yet somehow it hadn't hit me. This was all some cosmic misunderstanding, some spill on the sofa that God could clean right up. But wine stains and God was pissed.

"Yooo," Jack said. "Shit man, turn around."

I noticed my neck had locked up as I looked over and watched the other cars in the left lane. With shaking hands, I turned the wheel and prepared to join them, but my eyes caught something in the dark. In the elementary school's parking lot about fifty yards away, sat a squad car posted with his headlights out. Here I was about to pull a buzzed U-ey with the reaper's pet vulture lurking in the shadows, hungry for the scraps of chumps scared enough to put themselves in situations like this.

"Nah, look," I said, pointing across Jack's face.

"Fuck," he said, combing his hair with his hands. "Fuck!"

My heart supplied the beat to the heavy metal screamo few like. I didn't know the consequences of a DUI and left it up to my imagination. With every nudge forward on this checkout line from hell, a new nightmare warped my mind. The breathalyzer. Closer. The handcuffs. Closer. Mom's breakdown. Closer. Dad's despair hidden behind a blank face. Closer. The worthlessness of my academic sacrifice. Closer. The lifelong friends in college I'd never meet. Closer. The crazies in whatever juvie I'd be taken to. Closer. The pitiful job-seeking process decades later. Closer. Shattered dreams. Closer. The pointless future of a felon.

At the entrance to the elementary school's north parking lot, the reaper's right-hand man waved me forward as I lowered the window. He glanced at the corner of my windshield before leaning in, his flashlight blinding me.

"Hi, sir. How you doin' tonight?"

"Good, good."

"My name is Officer Hove with the Bethlehem Township Police Department. We're doing a sobriety checkpoint here tonight. Have you had anything to drink?"

With black streaks painted under my eyes, I sat there in a bathing suit and coconut bra and told him, "No sir."

He eyed me up before shining his flashlight at Jack and around the cockpit.

"I'm gonna have to ask you to park in that lot over there," he said, pointing to a couple squad cars and a white police trailer that looked like it was taking blood donations.

"Alright."

I had watched every one of the safe, responsible cars in front of me proceed without any issues. Why me? Surely it wasn't *that* difficult to follow the rules. Don't drink and drive. Seemed easy enough, but I hadn't thought about it the whole night. Or maybe I had, somewhere deep down, drowned by the conscious part of myself laughing and loving, but not living.

I pulled into the spot my Mom had used countless times to drop me off at soccer practice. I sat face-to-face with the field I had once pranced on in my kindergarten days. Freaky, that this parking lot was used both as a child's entrance into a world of play and as an exit where special agents destroyed the lives of those who stayed too long.

My trail of terror-thought continued for another fifteen minutes until the reaper himself emerged from the trailer. The fuck was he doing in there? The line was back on the road. I could picture him sitting in there, his eyes on the television, his walkie buzzing.

"Hey Mike, I got one comin' your way."

"Hold up, game's almost over."

Hell, but to him, just another day. He did this for a *living*. It was a routine, a chore. He had dealt with dealers, rapists and murderers. I was just a pawn, DUI number eleven of the month. It was his duty, but I knew the man couldn't care less. I wanted to reach out the window, shake his shoulders and try to reach that part of him, try to convince him that he was missing the big game in the trailer, that I wasn't worth shit.

I wish I could describe him, but his flashlight lit up the cockpit.

"License and registration please."

"Sure," I said.

I reached over Jack's shaking foot, popped the glove compartment and removed a thick stack of manuals, insurance files and other important stuff I'd never care to learn about. I sifted through it all in front of the officer, careful to skip over the blunt wrappers, determined to find this thing called a registration. I sorted through it all with steady hands as if it were part of the procedure. The officer only watched. When I thought I had it, I would pull it out, show it to him and ask, "This?"

"No."

Three or four more cycles of this repeated before I reached the near-end of the stack.

"That's it," the officer said.

I handed it over along with my license. The cop snagged it and disappeared into the trailer.

"The fuck was that?!" Jack said.

"I don't know! I don't know what a fucking registration is!"

Jack dropped his head, shaking his hands through his hair. My Dad had introduced me to the registration before, but I hadn't paid attention. He had a way of rambling on as if he wasn't sure what to say, with his discussions acting as experiments to sort good from bad. It got me, caged up in his lost words, never knowing when he'd finish. A couple seconds of his voice in my ear and I'd catch his drift, zoning out into a world of "Yes" and "Ok" responses without ever knowing what I'd agreed to.

More horror in hell's waiting room. No more receptionists. No more sign-in sheets. I was here. My name would be called any minute. I had sweated through the back of my floral shirt, yet the collar was better soaked from wiping my face, trying to hide the evidence. Engulfed in

paranoid visions, I forgot to breathe. This resulted in the occasional jolty super-breath that startled Jack beside me, but he didn't dare ask what was wrong.

With the diagnosis in his hand, the doctor made his way over. Strange, how I became somewhat cool in an instant, like some Darwinian survival instinct had taken over, some ever-present speck of last hope trying to persuade the cop that I was healthy, sober and fit to drive.

"Alright," he said handing my license, my registration and my fine over. "You've got an expired inspection sticker, so you're gonna have to get that renewed before you can—"

That's all I heard. No joy or relief, only more confusion. I remained on edge in case the universe changed its mind again.

Dad had asked me countless times to get the car inspected. He should've explained what would happen if I didn't. Then, maybe, I would've listened. Maybe.

The officer probably explained the details of the fine, but I couldn't pay attention. It was as if I had bungeed off a bridge, forgot and now felt the sudden yank of the cable going stiff. As it all slowed down, I thought maybe what this man's telling me was important.

"—the payment's due in 10 days," the officer said. "Any longer and you'll have to go to court. You can challenge the fine if you want, but again, you'll have to go to court."

"Ok," I said. "Thank you."

He gave one of those cheap grins.

"Take care now," he said turning back for the trailer.

I waited until he was gone to face Jack, who was still scratching his head, but laughing.

"Holy shit," he said.

"Holy shit."

We sat there for another minute, exchanging more laughs, "Oh my gods" and "Fucks." I wondered if it'd be safe to drive away. It'd be worse not to. I pulled out, passed the trailer and made a right past the cop waving people through.

On the stretch of road to Jack's, we blasted Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" off my phone and hollered, "Hare Krishna! Krishna Krishna! Hare Rama!" out the open windows.

Though I took a different road home that night, they'd get me within a year.